

Sermon for Trinity 7 (2020)
Installation of Rev. Dcn. Floyd Smithey at Knoxville, TN

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from Jesus Christ, His Son, our Savior. Amen.

In the first chapter of Genesis, the Triune God said, “*See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food.*” (1:29) And, after the Flood, the Lord said to Noah, “*Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs.*” (Gen. 9:1–3) In the aftermath of the Deluge, the Lord granted to man that all things were now good for his sustenance; but still the presence of sin brought famine, misery, sickness, and death.

In the appointed Gospel, we hear of a hunger which afflicted the multitude because of their devotion to the Word. St. Mark tells us, “*In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples to Him and said to them, ‘I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar.’*” They had been with Jesus for three days, and if they had any food at the beginning, it was now expended, so if those who heard the Lord were to safely return to their homes, it was necessary that their bodies be nourished.

What were “those days” in which the multitude heard the Lord? In the preceding chapter, Jesus cast out the demon from the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, and came through the midst of Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee. Because of this travel route, some commentators speculate that many of those among the multitude of 4,000 were, in fact, Gentiles. And the way in which Jesus refers to them—that “*some of them have come from afar*” calls to mind the words of Isaiah 60: “*The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around and see: They all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be nursed at your side.*” (v. 3–4) Now those who hear the Messiah came from afar, and having heard the word of the Lord, lacked the strength of their own bodies to carry them home again.

As with the feeding of the 5,000, so, too, with the feeding of the 4,000: the Lord’s compassion for them is bound up with the people hearing His Word; Jesus feeds the multitude, but it is in the context of them having heard His doctrine. For the food which the Lord fed the flock might have brought them safely back to their earthly homes, but the Word which He proclaimed to them would avail to everlasting life for all who believed it.

On both occasions, the multitude were fed miraculously—and yet they were fed by the very One who had given them every meal which they had ever received. The Lord feeds them through means—He gives the loaves and fish to the disciples, and they, in turn, distribute the food to the multitude.

Consider again the words of the Collect: “O God, whose never-failing providence orders all things both in heaven and earth, we humbly beseech Thee to put away from us all hurtful things and to give us those things which be profitable for us”. The petition is two-fold: that the Lord would put away the hurtful things away from us, and give us the profitable things. The prayer thus acknowledges that without the Lord restraining the bad and granting the good, we would have cause to fear. And we are taught concerning this truth in the Epistle reading from Romans 6.

The Lord has established the estates in this Word for the sake of caring for our needs. Church, State, and Home all see to the distribution of food, the maintenance of order, and the inculcation of faith, hope, love and the other virtues. The Lord fed the 4,000, as He has fed them every other day of their lives; on this day, the order for the distribution of such sustenance was the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fish and their distribution through His disciples.

It is for this reason that the Lord has established the office of the holy ministry: that the flock might be fed with the Bread of Life. The Lord works instrumentally, and with regard to the means of grace, these are the only means which He has revealed whereby we may be saved. It is as we declare in our Augsburg Confession concerning the forgiveness of sins: "This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and administer the Sacraments, according to the calling, either to many or to individuals. For thereby are granted, not bodily, but eternal things, as eternal righteousness, the Holy Ghost, eternal life. For these things cannot come but by the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments." (¶ 8-9)

The disciples marveled that the Lord would feed the multitude in the midst of a wilderness; but He grants us that and far more in this vale of tears, this fallen world. In the midst of death and sorrow, the Lord of Life, the Son of God was born according to the promise of the Lord, to the Blessed Virgin Mary, as had been prophesied since our first parents fell into sin and death. The Lord has preserved His remnant in the wilderness of this world since that day: for the generations unto Noah, He preserved them from the hatred of the sons of Cain. For the generations after the flood, the life of Abraham received the promise, and they were preserved in their time living in tents, through their captivity in Egypt, through their wandering in the wilderness in the time of Moses, to their tumultuous days of lapses and restoration throughout the days of the Judges, the days of David and his house, even through the captivity in Babylon, to the restoration of the remnant, to the coming of the Christ, as announced by His messenger, St. John the Baptist. We have been a pilgrim people in a wilderness since our parents were sent out of the Garden of Eden. But the Lord has never left us, nor has He forsaken us.

We are gathered today that a brother in the holy office might be installed as a deacon to minister in this place, in this city. He is to fulfill that office to which the Lord of the Church has called Him through His Church, so that the people of God might receive all that which the Lord has promised. It is needful for our salvation that the means of grace which the Lord has granted for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith be administered to Christ's holy Church. For this purpose, the Lord has established the office of the ministry and has sent for this stewards of the mysteries of God to feed the flock, to forgive sins, to bind up the wounds, and to admonish, exhort, rebuke, encourage, and absolve the saints of the Triune God.

How shall the flock be fed? As has always been the case, through the Word and Sacraments which Christ Jesus has instituted. The Lord observed that the multitude had been with Him for three days; but He endured three days alone in the tomb, having made atonement for our sins through the shedding of His blood on the cross. The One who declared "I thirst" from the cross is the One who is feeds His Church with His own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. He has gathered us into His flock, into His Church, through Water and the Word, placing the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost upon us to mark us as His people.

The Church is gathered to hear the word of the Christ, and she always will, for the Christ rose victorious and has sent out His stewards of His holy mysteries to proclaim His Word to the consolation and strengthening of His saints.

The Lord sent away the 4,000 when their hunger had been satiated; but the day is coming when He will gather the whole of His Church, that they might abide with Him forever. We are the recipients of the gift of God—the faith—and abiding in this faith by the work of the Holy Spirit, we await that day when the Lord will gather us to Himself forever. Amen.